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### Miracles, Divine Action, and the Laws of Nature

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# Memory, Meaning & Faith

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March 25, 2011

## Miracles, Divine Action, and the Laws of Nature

By Martin Hanna, Department of Theology and Christian Philosophy, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary.



In this blog, I share some reflections on miracles, divine action, and the laws of nature. In subsequent parts, I briefly survey how these issues are dealt with in a recently published book by [John Walton](#) (part 1), in the writings of [Ellen G. White](#) (part 2), and in the Bible (part 3).

### 1. John Walton's Perspective

Miracles and the laws of nature. In *The Lost World of Genesis One*, Walton writes that in the Bible, “there were no [supernatural] ‘miracles’ (in the sense of events deviating from that which was ‘natural’)” (20). God is “carrying out his purposes through the naturalistic operations of the cosmos” that “were decreed by the word of God” (117). “What we identify as natural laws only take on their law-like quality because God acts so consistently in the operations of the cosmos” (134). However, “we should not expect anything in the Bible . . . to engage in the discussion of how God’s level of creative activity relates to . . . the laws of nature” (20).

Miracles and the laws of evolution. Walton concludes that “everything that science discovers is another step in understanding how God [works]” (115). While “not promoting evolution” (165), Walton holds that the metaphysical perspective (117) of “biblical theology is compatible with” evolution’s “descriptive mechanism” (153). There are no “hard and fast lines of distinction between the scientific and the metaphysical. . . . [N]one of us has a worldview comprised of only one of them. Science and metaphysics blend together in life” (130-131).

Miracles and the laws of functional creation. Supernatural miracles may be implied in Walton’s teaching that God did “build” the material cosmos (88). However, for Walton, Genesis 1 does not describe the process of material origins (163). Instead, it is a liturgy for recounting the functions of the cosmos (91). “The cosmic temple” is “made functional (created) in an

inauguration ceremony” (88). Therefore, “the seven days are . . . the period of time devoted to the inauguration of the functions of the cosmic temple” (92).

Miracles and the laws of interpreting the Bible. Walton recognizes that the Bible offers “an explanation of origins and how the world operated, not only for Israel, but for people today who put their faith in the Bible” (15). He is also aware that “it is . . . easy to let our own ideas . . . twist the [biblical] material to fit our own context” (10). Therefore, his book should be evaluated in terms of the success or failure of his goals: to understand “what the Bible communicates”; to “preserve” and “enhance” its “theological vitality” (7); and “to identify, truly and accurately . . . the thinking in the world of the Bible” (19).

## **2. Ellen White’s Perspective**

Like Walton, White teaches that God works miracles through the laws of nature. However, she draws very different conclusions about the implications of this teaching for our understanding of divine action and the miracle of creation.

God works miracles through His words/laws. “The written word” in the Bible is “the law of God” (Great Controversy, 268). Similarly, “throughout the universe His word is law” (Manuscript Releases, 18:136). “Men of science claim that” “a miracle” “would be a violation of law. . . . They represent God as bound by His own laws—as if the operation of divine laws could exclude divine freedom. Such a teaching is opposed to the testimony of the Scriptures. . . . The natural cooperates with the supernatural” (Great Controversy, 525).

Types of miracles and the laws of nature. “God’s miracles do not always bear the outward semblance of miracles. Often they are brought about in a way which looks like the natural course of events” (Selected Messages, 2:346). “The natural life is preserved moment by moment by divine power; yet it is not sustained by a direct miracle” (Acts of the Apostles, 284). This is because “every . . . law” “contains or implies a promise. If it is obeyed, blessings will attend our steps; if it is disobeyed, the result is danger and unhappiness” (Testimonies, 5:445).

Miracles and the laws of Scripture and nature. “God does not annul his laws nor work contrary to them; but he is continually using them as his instruments. . . . [He] works in, and through, and above [nature’s] laws. . . . The book of nature and the written word . . . make us acquainted with . . . the wise and beneficent laws through which he works” (Signs of the Times, Mar 20, 1884). “The term ‘laws of nature’ comprises what men have been able to discover with regard to the laws that govern the physical world; but how limited is their knowledge, and how vast the field in which the Creator can work in harmony with His own laws and yet wholly beyond the comprehension of finite beings!” (Patriarchs and Prophets, 114).

Miracles and the laws of evolution. The rejection of miracles leads to an uncritical acceptance of philosophical aspects of evolutionary science. “The Creator and His works are beyond finite comprehension, and men conclude that because they cannot explain the works . . . of God from natural causes, the Bible history is not reliable. . . . The theories and speculations of philosophy would make us believe that man has come by slow degrees, not merely from a savage state, but from the very lowest form of the brute creation. They destroy man’s dignity because they will not admit God’s miraculous power” (Upward Look, 156).

The miracle of creation according to Genesis. In Genesis, “is clearly set forth the origin of the human race; and the divine record is so plainly stated that there is . . . no ground for the supposition that man was evolved by slow degrees of development from the lower forms of animal or vegetable life. Such teaching lowers the great work of the Creator to the level of man’s narrow, earthly conceptions. . . . The genealogy of our race, as given by inspiration, traces back its origin, not to a line of developing germs, mollusks, and quadrupeds, but to the great Creator” (Patriarchs and Prophets, 44-45).

## **3. The Biblical Perspective**

Walton and White each seek to present the biblical perspective on miracles, divine action, and the laws of nature (see parts 1 and 2 above). Therefore, in this part of my blog, I survey some relevant biblical insights. Bible quotations are taken from the New King James Version.

God acts through His words/laws. The relations between miracles and the laws of nature are illuminated by the overlap of the biblical concepts of word and law. The prophet Isaiah writes: “Hear the word of the Lord . . . Give ear to the law of our God” (Is. 1:10). Through Isaiah, God indicates that He acts through His word/law. “My word . . . will not return to Me void, but it will accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (55:11).

God creates materials and functions. The first chapter of Genesis teaches that God acts by his word to create: “light” and its function as “day” (Gen. 1:3-5); the firmament and its function to separate waters (1:6-8); the separation of waters and dry land (1:9-10); the bringing of vegetation from the land (1:11-13); the “lights” and their function as rulers of day and night (1:14-19); the fish, birds, and animals, and their function to multiply; and the human beings and their function to multiply and exercise dominion (1:20-31).

Miracles through God’s uncreated Word. The Apostle John writes that “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . All things were made through Him” (1:1,3; cf. Col. 1:16). In addition, He is “upholding all things by the word of his power (*dunamis*)” (Heb. 1:3). God’s uncreated Word also intervened within the framework of the laws of nature when “the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:14).

Miracles apart from law witnessed by law. Miracles are not activated by created words/laws in themselves or by our manipulation of these laws. The Apostle Paul asks: Does God “work (*energeo*) miracles (*dunamis*) in you by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith?” (Gal. 3:5). The miracle “power (*dunamis*) of . . . salvation” is “for all who believe” that what God “promised” in His word/law He is “able to perform” (Rom. 1:16; 4:21). As such, miracles are “apart from the law” while being “witnessed by the law” (3:21).

Miracles do what God’s laws cannot do. Paul writes that: “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled (*pleroo*) in us” (Rom. 8:2-4). God’s miracles also fulfill the laws of nature since Christ “ascended far above all the heavens, that He might [ful]fill (*pleroo*) all things” (Eph. 4:10).

Miracles fulfill rather than abolish God’s laws. “The creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21). Through the miracle of salvation by faith in Christ “we have been delivered (*katargeo*) from the law” (Rom. 7:6). “Do we then make void (*katargeo*) the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law” (3:31). Jesus also said: “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law . . . I did not come to destroy but to fulfill (*pleroo*)” (Matt. 5:17).

The biblical insights presented here (part 3) provides a basis for evaluating some aspects of the views of Walton (part 1) and White (part 2). However, no detailed evaluation has been attempted in this brief blog. My goal has been to stimulate reflection and discussion of the relations of miracles, divine action, and the laws of nature. So, give me some feedback by answering one or more of the following questions.


## Questions

- What are the points where you strongly agree or strongly disagree with the perspectives I have surveyed in my blog?
- Is the Bible a textbook on the laws of nature? Are miracles rare events or do they happen every day? Does the miracle of salvation abolish God’s laws?
- Does God work miracles which no one recognizes as miraculous? Or do miracles only take place when there is someone prepared to be surprised by them?
- Are God’s miracles limited to his actions within the framework of the laws of nature? Or are the creation and sustaining of the laws of nature also miracles?

Posted by Martin Hanna on March 25, 2011 in Biblical Backgrounds, Science and Theology | Permalink

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professor, thanks for your reflections, this topic of supernatural acts have been in my mind lately. I recently finish a paper about MAGIC in the Greco-Roman world for NT class, and the thing I notice is that there is not clear definition of what constitute a magic or miracle (besides that it is something believed as supernatural). So my question for you is about definition of terms, what is a miracle? or magic?

Posted by: [Rodrigo Galiza](#) | [April 03, 2011 at 09:20 AM](#)

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